

# D&D Fiction

## Oroon Rising, Part 4

*by Ed Greenwood*



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### Chapter 4: Always Staelghast Around Us

"We've been here before," Jallana said slowly. "I know these walls, yon room ahead. I... remember. 'Tis faint, but..."

The dwarf mage nodded, smoke curling from her pipe, and brushed ash unconcernedly off her gown-covered bosom. "I can see that idol, large and fire-amber, holding its bowl of flames and staring out at us with those two huge gems of eyes. Rooms away 'tis, yet, but I can see it in my mind. And I know I've seen it before, more than once. Stood there in front, staring up at it and wondering how it was going to doom me -- and knowing it would, whatever we tried. And it always did."

"Ha!" Lockilgar laughed merrily, bounding into the air to try to meet their gazes on their level rather than peering up. "The only 'always' I know is that Lockilgar the Glorious always prevails in the end!"

Tarlastra stared at him sourly, thinking he looked more like a small and dirty boy playing at swamp-frog than ever. "Huh. You don't know much, then."

The halfling gave her a merry grin. "Your grim disparagement rolls off me like blunt arrows off a castle wall. Lady Glumnose the Dwarf, I dub you! See to your spells and save your dark words for elsewhen! Lockilgar has victories to seize, triumphs to savor, heroics—"

"To spew empty words about," Tarlastra snarled. "If you don't hold down your tongue, right now, I'm going to—"

She whirled around and started to trudge back the way they'd come. Or tried to.... Three slouching steps brought her to a slow, straining halt. Her face darkened, and Jallana saw the dwarf's trembling begin. Cords stood out on Tarlastra's thick neck, and she spat and sweated and shuddered... but she could move not a stride farther, back along the way they'd come.

"Voices," she muttered, ducking her head as if icy sleet was driving into her eyes. "In my head, whispering... cursing me... threatening me..."

"We're being... goaded," Jallana agreed, putting an arm around Tarlastra's brawny but trembling shoulders. "I can feel it too. Someone—someones, more than one—is riding our minds, making us proceed this way, and only this way."

"To the idol," Tarlastra whispered, "where we've always died before."

"Nonsense!" Lockilgar said brightly. "I don't remember any such thing!"

“There’s nonsense hereabouts, all right,” the dwarf growled, turning around to resume their advance to the still-distant idol, “and he’s capering around me now, spouting overloud idiocy. I wonder if the Voices would mind overmuch if I wrung his neck?”

“Try it,” Jallana and Lockilgar said together, in very different tones of voice. Tarlastra glowered at the halfling. “No. You may prove useful for something. Climbing the idol, or dancing through its fire-bowl, or getting stuck on the end of some lizardfolk battleaxe so it can’t cleave Jallana or me. Just still your tongue for a breath or two, and try being a strong, silent hero. We know you’re braver than brave, more daring than any other, and the gods smile on your prowess like grinning idiots. We acknowledge that, look you!”

Lockilgar swept her a full-court bow, florid and with the most mincing flourishes, and then skipped ahead, bowing in several directions as if accepting the applause of vast unseen crowds.

And then, with a yelp of startled surprise, he fell through the floor, demonstrating that one flagstone at least was no more than spell-spun illusion. Jallana and Tarlastra snorted in momentary mirth, exchanged glances, and cautiously hastened forward, the warrior-woman probing with her sword to find where stone ended and illusion began.

“This is just a pit,” Jallana murmured, as if struggling to remember. “Bones at the bottom, about forty feet down. If he hasn’t broken his fool neck...”

Tarlastra nodded. “You fell down it once. I fell down it as well, and broke my leg. Right here.” She rubbed her right thigh. “These memories, echoing in my head like voices carrying through caverns...” She shook her head. “We’ve been here before, many times. With Damryn and Ransur and all the others. Herded along.”

Jallana nodded, undid her midriff-plates, and started to unwind the coils of rope around her hips. “By who?” she asked grimly. “And why?”

The dwarf tapped out her pipe on the edge of the unseen pit. Somewhere below, Lockilgar cursed in disgust as the ashes showered down upon his head. “I know not. To find or retrieve something, I suppose. Something that’s waiting somewhere beyond the Big Idol.”

Jallana reached the end of the rope. Wrapping it around her leg and one forearm, she kicked the loose coils over the edge and braced herself. “Up, little loud hero,” she called, and almost immediately felt the tug and weight of Lockilgar, climbing fast.

Tarlastra lifted her hands, ready to hurl deadly magic if whatever came up out of the pit didn’t look like Lockilgar.

“A temporary setback, ladies,” his cheerful voice announced from below. “However, I’ve explored down there thoroughly, and am confident in saying the shaft holds no hidden way onwards, nor treasure cache. So we can forget about this particular pit—”

“No,” Jallana said firmly, as Lockilgar appeared through the still-apparently-solid stone floor, favoring them with an airy wave. “That’s how you got to tour it this time, remember?”

“Lady Jal—”

A strong, stout-fingered dwarf hand clamped over the halfling's mouth, bringing him to silence more out of astonishment than as any sort of effective gag.

Tarlastra extended her other arm, pointing at several already-sprung traps around them. The stone casket besmirched with stains, of an earlier Damryn's spilled blood from where the descending blade severed one of his hands. The false door weighted to topple over on anyone trying to open it, still lying askew on the floor from where they'd thrown it aside to get at Ransur's crushed body. Yonder, more bloodstains around the flagstone that thrust sword blades up at anyone treading on it, waist-high. Traps they all remembered.

"Why would anyone build all this?" Tarlastra asked quietly. "I ask seriously: why?"

"Folk are crazed," Lockilgar intoned grandly, wriggling free of her hand to strike what he no doubt believed was a heroic pose. "Those who work magic—and dwarves who hew stone, too, to carve out endless grand rooms underground—more than most."

Tarlastra gave him a dark look. "If I knew something really foul to say in halfling speech, I'd say it now. Loudly."

A slithering sound came to them then, as if something hard-scaled and very large was moving slowly across flagstones. Something in the next chamber ahead. On a whim, Jallana started to walk away from it, back the way they'd come.

Almost immediately, the air seemed to thicken around her, as if she was struggling in hardening mud. She watched her boot descend slowly to the flagstone ahead of her, slowly... ever more slowly...

When she spun around, freedom returned so swiftly she almost fell over. Hopping awkwardly to regain her balance, she abruptly became aware of something else. Something she'd never felt in Staelghast before.

"We're being watched." Jallana's shoulders prickled, and she whirled to peer at one of the dark, empty archways that led out of the room. She saw nothing but darkness, and whirled to peer at another. And another. "Gods, I feel naked," she muttered.

"I feel it, too," the dwarf agreed, teeth clenched around her pipe. "Not the Voices that ride in our heads, not some snooping farscry spell. Something here in Staelghast—yonder just inside the darkness, beyond where we can see—is watching us."



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